

# Reflections of Africa: Investigating the subsidiary of African indigenous culture and its applications in the contemporary scenario through *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

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**Abstract:** While considered a distinctive genre, multiple elements can be observed in the African American culture and literature that overlap with indigenous African culture. However, there is limited research on the African roots of African American culture. Additionally, there is still scope left in exploring how African indigenous practices can lead to sustainable living. The main objective of this comparative study is to highlight the indigenous African connections of African American culture and to explore the applications of African indigenous wisdom on global issues through Jesmyn Ward's novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. The analysis revealed that African American culture is rooted in the African indigenous cultural practices. Moreover, with the concepts of oral tradition, spirituality, Ubuntu, and eco-bio-communitarianism, African indigenous wisdom can help resolve various contemporary complications, such as communal friction, irreligiosity, diasporic trauma, and environmental issues, including biodiversity loss, natural resource depletion, and climate change, leading to a sustainable future.

**Keywords:** African American culture, African indigenous knowledge, interdependence, Ubuntu, sustainable future

## Introduction

African American literature is often read as a distinct literary genre rather than an extension of American or African literature. The unique struggle of African Americans with slavery, Jim Crow laws, mass incarceration, racism, and economic and educational disparities led their literature to stand apart from other literatures. The distinctiveness

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of their culture, art, and literature was recognised for the first time after the 1920s with the Harlem Renaissance. Significant features of African American literature include oral tradition, magical realism, spirituality, racial struggle, and identity exploration, which are prominent elements in the African American novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. The identity crisis in their literature suggests a sense of disconnection from their roots, the roots that lie in their homeland, the continent of Africa. The wider reach of the English language and the preservation of the elements of African culture led to the subsequent blooming of African American literature. Yet African culture is considered primitive and unsophisticated by the more developed countries, and its potential remains underexplored.

### **Methodology**

The study critically analyses Jesmyn Ward's novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* under the lens of indigenous African culture. This research relies upon the ideas and concepts shared by the critical thinkers in the texts, including *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel* (2009), especially the contribution of Ato Quayson in the chapter, "Magical Realism and the African Novel", P.A.H. Asante's insights in *Distant Markets, Distant Harms: Economic Complicity and Christian Ethics* (2014) under "The African Concept of Community and Individual in the Context of the Market", J.G. Maree and C.M. Du Toit's ideas in *Counseling People of African Ancestry* (2011) as "The Role of Oral Tradition in Counseling People of African Ancestry". The concept of Eco-bio-communitarianism in the chapter "Some African Reflections on Biomedical and Environmental Ethics" by Godfrey B. Tangwa in *A Companion to African Philosophy* (2005) and A.C. Terblanché-Greeff's insights in the chapter, "Ubuntu and Environmental Ethics: The West Can Learn from Africa When Faced with Climate Change" in the book, *African Environmental Ethics: A Critical Reader* (2019) play a vital role in the analysis of this research.

Through Jesmyn Ward's novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, this comparative study will attempt to explore the overlapping elements of African indigenous culture and African American traditions to learn whether the latter is an extension of the former. Moreover, the study will also seek to understand how African indigenous knowledge can help resolve various global humankind complications, from communal friction to environmental issues. For easy comprehension, the paper is divided into four sections, each discussing a distinct element of

indigenous African culture that includes the importance of oral tradition, spirituality embedded in magical realism, understanding the spirit of communal harmony in indigenous communities through the concept of Ubuntu, and the interdependency of people having African ancestry and nature with special focus to terms like Eco-Bio-Communitarianism and Indigenous Knowledge System.

### *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

Dealing with the perspectives of three narrators, Jojo, Leonie, and later Richie, the novel is set in Bois Sauvage, Mississippi. Born out of wedlock, Jojo is a 13-year-old biracial adolescent, raised in the care of his grandparents, Mam and Pop. Enrooted in spirituality and cancer-ridden now, Mam was a practitioner of voodoo and indigenous herbal knowledge. Jojo's mother, Leonie, is a drug addict struggling with the racial killing of his brother, Given by the hands of the cousin of her Caucasian boyfriend, Michael. She frequently sees the ghost of Given, whenever she indulges in substance intoxication. Her second child, Kayla (Michaela), is taken care of primarily by Jojo. Michael is imprisoned at the Mississippi State Penitentiary, Parchman, for drug trafficking, the same place Pop was imprisoned with Richie decades ago for harbouring a fugitive, Stag, his brother. Jojo's favourite activity is listening to Pop's stories about Richie and Parchman.

Michael is getting released, so Leonie, with her Caucasian friend, Misty, Jojo, and Kayla take a long drive to receive him. After reaching the prison, Jojo and Kayla encounter the ghost of Richie, who has been waiting to go home. The narrative shifts to Richie's insufferable life in prison and his life after death. Looking at Jojo, he immediately recognises his blood relation to River (or Pop). In search of home and to find an answer for his death, he joins the family on their journey back. Eventually, Richie finds out the truth of his death at the hands of his friend, to save him from a torturous death by the pale-skinned community. Mam is on her last breath when the two ghosts appear and start fighting to take her spirit with them. As instructed by Mam, Leonie builds an altar of cemetery rocks, cotton, cornmeal, and rum, as she invokes Maman Brigitte. Mam dies, and Given takes her spirit with him. Richie continues to stay in a tree beside the Stone family's house with other spirits, waiting to pass on their stories. The novel closes with Kayla calming the spirits with her incomprehensible lullaby.

### **The importance of oral tradition**

Besides being a key feature in African American writing, storytelling or the oral tradition is an indigenous attribute of the African continent as well. It survived the Middle Passage, slavery, and Jim Crow while maintaining the unique communication style “rich in allusion, metaphor, and imagery and prolific in the use of body gestures and nonverbal nuances” (Hamlet 2011, 28). Oral tradition is looked down upon and seen as primitive by the more ‘civilised’ societies across the world, which support writing over orality (Isha 2012, 212). However, it is the technique that principally connected humans and later acted as a medium of exchange for ancestors’ thoughts, traditions, and teachings, passed down by *griots* through tales and ballads, accompanied by dance and performances. According to Gugler (2003, 36), the *griot* or *griotte* is a historian, a consultant, the voice of the God, a mediator, the master of ceremonies, and a praise singer. African sheldon to their indigenous oral tradition during the initial denial of their inclusion in the education system and the dominant society in general, which assisted in the subsequent blooming of their African American culture.

African storytelling is well-knit in the novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, where the primary responsibilities of the characters, Pop and Richie, are analogous to those of the *griots*, as these characters are also keeping the history (of slavery and brutality) alive through stories. Pop shares the story his grandmother used to recount about her great-grandmother, who belonged to the first generation of Africans, kidnapped from their homes and sold in the New World.

...in her village, they ate fear. Said it turned the food to sand in they mouth...they never went out at night, and even in the day, they stayed in the shadows of they houses. But still, they came for her. Kidnapped her from her home in the middle of the day. Brought her here, and she learned the boats didn't sink to some watery place, sailed by white ghosts. She learned that bad things happened on that ship, all the way until it docked. That her skin grew around the chains. That her mouth shaped to the muzzle. That she was made into an animal under the hot, bright sky, the same sky the rest of her family was under, somewhere far away, in another world (Ward 2018, 69).

Correspondingly, Richie’s purpose, besides finding answers to his tragic end, is to pass on stories of the past to Jojo and ultimately to the readers (Khedhir 2020, 18). The insistence of Richie to tell his story even after his death suggests his need for a witness to carry his story of

injustice forward. Jojo becomes the witness and bears the responsibility of preserving the collective memory of his ancestors.

The storytelling technique is often used by the elders of the family to control the mischievous attitude of their children. Ward added a humorous instance showcasing Pop's scheme of stopping Jojo from running around the muddy pigpen barefoot. He tells the story of him, his sisters, and brothers getting worms in their "butts" while playing barefoot (Ward 2018, 2). Pop uses his unique storytelling technique, which is the creativity of the story and the seriousness in its delivery, that persuades his grandson to stop making trouble, as Jojo recounts, "I don't tell Pop, but that was more effective than the whipping" (Ibid, 2).

Folklore, orature, storytelling, myths, and fables have the power to comfort and heal an individual from past traumas and contemporary struggles, especially for the people of African ancestry (Maree and Du Toit 2011, 22). Jojo finds solace in Pop's stories, as if "his voice is a hand he's reached out to me, like he's rubbing my back and I can duck whatever..." (Ward 2018, 17) The significance of orality is that it never becomes futile after aiding one person; instead, its warmth flows from one person to another. Jojo's improvisation of the story of a wift rabbit named Kayla to her little sister, Michaela (nicknamed Kayla), when she was sick in the car (Ibid, 109) follows the African tradition of comforting through orality. The last chapter of the novel unfolds various unheard narratives of the ghosts of ancestors:

He raped me and suffocated me until I died I put my hands up and he shot me eight times she locked me in the shed and starved me to death while I listened to my babies playing with her in the yard they came in my cell in the middle of the night and they hung me they found I could read and they dragged me out to the barn and gouged my eyes before they beat me still I was sick and he said I was an abomination and Jesus say suffer little children so let her go and he put me under the water and I couldn't breathe (Ward 2018, 282–83).

In the end, Kayla sings, and all the spirits lean forward, nodding to her, "They smile with something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease" (Ward 2018, 284). This scene is illustrated as if the ghosts of the past have been waiting for years to be heard and acknowledged by the present generation. Saying pain out loud unburdened their heart and freed them from anonymity. Michaela's exchange with the spirits, "their refusal to leave and subsequent implicit act of leaving for home is associated with the sense of peace" they experienced after sharing their stories (Waheed et al. 2022, 620).

Since African indigenous culture does not follow written tradition, its existence relies solely on its people and not the scriptures or texts. Their literature is unique “because it was never written down, was always one generation from extinction. But for the same reason, it was cherished and revered” (Momaday 1968, 90). Additionally, every generation continues to add a distinctiveness of its own; therefore, oral cultures are never static, they’re always undergoing some change.

### **Magical realism and spirituality**

Magical realism was first observed in the German style of painting known as *Neue Sachlichkeit* or *New Objectivity*; however, it is most associated with the literature of Latin America. Usongo and Gintsburg (2024, 2) claim that Latin American literature was originally influenced by African oral tradition brought by slaves and by Arabic literary tradition. It challenges the Western tradition of realism, positing instead an alternative universe in which fantastical elements are placed beside the real in a process of establishing equivalence between the two (Quayson 2009, 160). The key elements of magical realism are myth, legend, and folklore that are deeply embedded in the literatures of Africa and the African diaspora.

The Stone family still holds up to the centuries-old African-based traditions, as an important part of Leonie’s initial education included learning about the African-based religious and healing traditions. Mam tells Leonie that the ability to “see” and “hear” what most cannot runs in the family, “like silt in river water...it skips from sister to child to cousin” (Ward 2018, 40). The family depends on gris-gris bags for the protection of their family members, which is an inseparable element of the African spiritual practices. Since the family’s matriarch was bedridden, Pop carried out the tradition and made a gris-gris bag for Jojo, “so small two could fit in the palm of my (Jojo) hand...it’s smooth and warm, soft to my touch. Feels like leather” (Ibid, 70). The bag carried a white feather, a canine tooth of some animal “lined with black in the chewing grooves”, and a “small gray river rock” (Ibidem). The power of the gris-gris bag is tested when Leonie, Misty, Jojo, and Kayla are coming back from Parchman with Michael. On the way back, they were stopped by a racist, white police officer, who told Jojo to sit, “like I’m a dog” (Ibid, 170). Jojo was on the verge of being held by the cop but surprisingly came out of the situation uninjured. After returning home, Pop asked Jojo if it worked, to which he replied, “I think so. We made it. Got stopped by the police though” (Ibid, 221).

Unlike Western societies that promote individualism, indigenous African culture and society find value in ancestral traditions and community building. The ordinary treatment of the supernatural is again one of the features of magical realism. Gordon argues that the significance of ghosts, especially the spirit work in African American culture, owes its origin to their respected place in African life (Gordon 2008, 151). Indeed, the initial presence of the absent (Given and Richie) comes as a shock, but the ordinary description of their presence allows the reader to blend them with the living. In the novel, Mam unveils the myth behind the existence of ghosts

...that only happens when the dying's bad. Violent. The old folks always told me that when someone dies in a bad way, sometimes it's so awful even God can't bear to watch, and then half your spirit stays behind and wanders, wanting peace the way a thirsty man seeks water (Ward 2018, 236).

*Sing, Unburied, Sing* follows the indigenous African folklore tradition, where the ancestral spirits appear to protect and teach their younger generation. The appearance of ancestral spirits in African folklore and literature is a common phenomenon that represents the remembrance of the past. The spirit of Given only appears to Leonie, except for one occasion when he encounters Kayla, the moment a “white” police officer insults the family, indicating that the past has reached the present, and the dead are protecting the living ones (Waheed et al. 2022, 619). Extending this argument, the visibility of Given's spirit only to Leonie can be comprehended as an act of support and safe guard since she is the loneliest living character and needs help the most.

Another element of magical realism is the infinitude of time. Ward's narration of the afterlife of Richie carries the unbound nature of time, as for him, “Men left, men returned and left again. New men came. I burrowed and slept in the milky light, my time measured by the passing of all those black faces and the turning of the earth” (Ward 2018, 136). Evidently, Ward does not describe Richie's life as a ghost in much detail, the reason being its repetitiveness, where he is only an observer.

One of the most tumultuous scenes, the death of Mam, occurs towards the end of the novel. Cancer-ridden Mam asks Leonie to perform her deathbed rituals, like she drew the veil back so Leonie could walk into this life, she wanted her help to draw it back so she can walk into the next one and meet “the last mystère. Maman Brigitte. Let

her come into me. Possess me. She is the mother of the dead. The judge. If she comes, maybe she take me with her” (Ward 2018, 215). Following Mam’s instructions, Leonie builds an altar of cemetery rocks, cotton, cornmeal, and rum. The ghosts of Given and Richie appear in the house, both combating each other for Mom’s spirit to take with them.

“Say it,” Mama says. She’s let her hands fall. “The litany,” she says again, and her breath rattles in her throat... Given stands, thrashing against some invisible thing that holds him there... This moment done ate it all up: the past, the future. Do I say the words? I blink, and up on the ceiling there is a boy, a boy with the face of a toddler. I blink again, sand scouring my eye, and there is nothing. “Mama,” I choke, and it’s as weak and wanting as a baby’s. “Mommy.” My crying and Mama’s entreaties and Michaela’s wailing and Given’s shouting fill the room like a flood” (Ward 2018, 267).

The incorporation of the elements of voodoo, hoodoo, conjure, and root work contradicts the American literary tradition and should be recognised as a different genre (Mellis 2019, 3). The ancestral spirits of the novel play a vital role in connecting personal history to the communal, suggesting that the African people and the African diaspora value communal harmony over individualism.

### **The Spirit of Ubuntu**

The African indigenous community believes in the relatedness and interdependence of all individuals; this ideology is denoted by the term Ubuntu. Originating from sub-Saharan Africa, it is expressed by the pervasive maxim “A person is a person through other persons” (Terblanché-Greeff 2019, 97). Terblanché-Greeff reframes it as “A person is a Person through others”, where “person” (small letter p) refers to individual humans and “Person” (capital letter P) refers to the personhood and humanness a person should strive to become fully human (Ibidem).

In the novel, Mam is a practitioner of root work and midwifery, she continues the tradition passed on to her by Marie-Therese. Marie-Therese taught Mam everything she knew, and when she married Pop, it became her duty to deliver the babies, doctor folks, and make gris-gris bags for the protection of others (Ward 2018). Mam did not ask for any capital in exchange for her services; it was her belief in humanity and ancestral knowledge that inspired her to serve other people. Similar compassion is shown by Pop towards Richie in the Parchman prison. Being young and physically weak, Richie became a

prey to other Caucasian inmates, but River always protected him in whatever way he could.

River, who stood as the men flayed my back, as I sobbed and vomited and turned the earth to mud. I could feel him there, knew that he would carry me after they let me loose from the earth...The way he carried me to my cot, the way he bent over me, made something soft and fluttery as a jellyfish pulse in my chest (Ward 2018, 135).

To Richie, River was more than a friend, “Him my big brother. Him, my father” (Ibidem). His spirit wandered for decades in Parchman, looking for home; his quest ended as soon as he saw River’s grandchild, Jojo. “I’m coming home” (Ward 2018, 191), he says, implying he finds his home in River. This episode implies that the people of African descent regard unrelated people as part of their families.

In African indigenous culture, the dead are never gone; they continue to live in the physical world, either in memories or as spirits. Asante (2014, 207) asserts that an African community includes many people, among whom a lot are dead, a few are living, and an infinite number of individuals yet to be born. Likewise, Richie and Given, with other ancestral spirits, continue to appear in the novel and remain an inseparable part of the living community. As Mam is dying, there is an impression of a community gathering around her, including the presence of her family and the spirit world. Even after dying, Mam’s spirit is not secluded, it is accompanied by the spirit of her son. Given’s spirit says, “I come for you, Mama...I come with the boat, Mama” (Ward 2018, 269).

Given’s hand flutters above her face like he is a groom and Mama is a bride and he has pulled the veil from her head and let it fall back so they can look upon each other with love, clear and sweet as the air between them. Mama bucks as goes still (Ibidem).

Pop’s stories about his life and his ancestors’ serve as oral guidance for Jojo, which the older generation passes on to the younger for their benefit. Pop’s stories are “allusive, circular, repetitive, following the hesitation, reluctance, and digression as if (he is) unwilling to face, let alone share (his) memories” (Ngom 2020, 201). Ngom records that history was written by the conqueror, but the use of memory while storytelling allows the reconstitution of the personal and collective history of the colonised that is otherwise absent in or neglected by the official discourse (Ibidem). The African American characters of the

novel suffer from multiple traumas, including the historical trauma of separation from their ancestral home, slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration; the family trauma from Leonie and her boyfriend's drug addiction, compelling them to neglect the family's needs and the trauma of spiritual disconnection from their culture and tradition. The practice of Ubuntu helps the community to stand upright in the face of struggle.

The individualistic West views Ubuntu as primitive and a dependent behaviour; on the contrary, "individualistic plurality" is a key factor in Ubuntu, so that "a person can become a Person by interacting with other unique others" (Terblanché-Greeff 2019, 97). In this regard, the previous generation of Pop, Mam, and Richie are leading their younger generation towards their African identities.

### **Reverence for nature**

Tangwa (2004) explicates the concept of Ubuntu as an African thought that does not exclude non-humans from their community instead, it recognises the interconnectedness of all biosphere beings. This communitarian way of life can be observed in the "use of wisdom in taboos, proverbs, myths and folktales" of the African indigenous community (Ncheand Michael 2024, 5). Ubuntu supports the idea that no person is whole, and all individuals are in communion with each other and nature. This is described through the concept of Ukama, an extension of Ubuntu, which refers to relatedness as found in the cosmos (Terblanché-Greeff 2019, 98). Tangwa (2004, 389) explains this harmonious coexistence of humans with non-humans under the term "Eco-Bio-Communitarianism". This is described as a cultural philosophy and way of living life that blurs the boundaries between humans, animals, plants, and inanimate objects (Munung and Tangwa 2025, 1). For African indigenous people, forests are more than mere ecosystems; they are considered sacred as ancestral havens (Soko-De Jong and Maseko 2022, 7). Ward incorporated this belief in the novel. Pop tells Jojo, "there's spirit in everything. In trees, in the moon, in the sun, in the animals...you need all of them, all of the spirits in everything, to have balance" (Ward 2018, 73). This belief sharply contrasts with America's ideology, which puts humans at the centre of the cosmos.

The African thought subjectifies nature and gives a transcendental meaning to it. After the unfortunate death of Given, Mam started planting trees for him, "One every anniversary... If I live long enough,

going to be a forest here, she said, a whispering forest” (Ward 2018, 50). For Africans and African Americans, nature is something that is far beyond the understanding of humans, it is mystical. They regard nature as the driving force behind all spiritual activities; therefore, Jojo’s description of the Parchman prison, “concrete buildings and barbed-wire fences crisscrossing through fields...There’s no other sign, nothing in those fields: no cows, no pig, no chickens. There are crops coming in, baby plants, but they look small and stunted, as if they’ll never grow” (Ibid, 123), indicates that it is not a place for any living to exist, let alone human beings.

People with indigenous roots have a deep connection with the Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS). IKS is the accumulated knowledge of the indigenous people passed down by the ancestors, “about the interactions of human with nature, thus providing foods, medicines, shelter, and other necessities for living” (Glasson et al. 2010, 127). Similarly, Mam passed on her wisdom of herbal medicine to her daughter, Leonie. On the way to Parchman, the toddler Michaela becomes sick and vomits repeatedly. Despite Leonie’s past attempts to run from her cultural roots, her first thought to ease her child’s upset stomach was to use the African-based tradition of healing through indigenous herbal knowledge. Remembering her mother’s saying, “if I look carefully enough, I can find what I need in the world,” she pulls over the car and starts her search for the “milkweed” as she recalls her mother’s teachings,

That right there is cow parsnip. You can use the young leaves like celery when you cook, but the roots are more useful. You can make a decoction for cold and flu. And if you make them poultice, you can ease and heal bruises, arthritis, and boils...This pigweed...Got a lot of vitamins in it, so it’s good for you... Wormseed, I would say. Good for getting rid of worms if you use it like seasoning in food (Ward 2018, 102-103).

Although she was unable to find “milkweed” or “wild strawberries”, she was successful in finding another substitute, the “wild blackberries”, except her hazy memory incapacitates her to remember whether to use the leaves of the plant or the vine, or the roots and she utters, “This is the kind of world it is. The kind of world that gives you a blackberry plant, a doughy memory, and a child that cant’s keep nothing inside” (Ward 2018, 105). The death of Given keeps haunting Leonie, which leads to her distrust in the African culture. This faith is restored when Jojo starts to understand Leonie, “I think I know

something about what she feels. That maybe I know a little bit about why she left after Mam died, why she slapped me, why she ran” (Ibid, 279), but him with Kayla respectfully rejects their mother’s path and follows the footsteps of their grandfather in the numen presence of the ancestral spirits “as he leads us back to the house...and now she sings it. *Home*, they (ancestral spirits) say. *Home*.” (Ibid, 285)

Indigenous knowledge is subjective; it changes with time and geography, while Western science is objective and universal. The subjectivity of the ecosystem creates a bond between nature and the people of African descent. Even the festivals in African societies often revolve around events such as harvests, rites of passage, or spiritual observances, and are often intertwined with the natural environment, serving as an agency for ecosystem preservation (Obamwonyi and Onyekuru 2024, 14). These celebrations with their various rituals and ceremonies encourage responsible resource management and sustainable living practices by the community (Ibid, 15). Hence, African indigenous knowledge has the power to provide relief from various major global environmental issues such as climate change, biodiversity loss, natural resource depletion, and pollution.

## **Conclusion**

By adapting the African literary traditions, many contemporary African American authors, including Jesmyn Ward, Tara M. Stringfellow, Yaa Gyasi, and Morgan Jerkins, attempt to reclaim their African identity, while also providing African indigenous culture a global platform to showcase its potential. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* tells the story of unwavering faith in the indigenous African culture, where the previous generation depicts its strong roots, the contemporary portrays its uncertainty, leading to the eventual restoration of faith by the next generation.

Embedded in folklore, the indigenous knowledge holds significant value to people of African ancestry, possessing literature enriched with ancestral guidance, ecological wisdom, communal harmony, and spirituality. People with indigenous ancestry do not see nature as the other; rather, they celebrate it as a mystical part of their community. The strength of African culture lies in its oral tradition, which carries the power to influence and heal fellow folks. Oral tradition with magical realism together functions as a three-way junction, connecting the memory (collective) of past, present, and future generations. The applications of African indigenous wisdom are infinite; it can help

solve various humankind issues such as communal friction, diasporic trauma, and irreligiosity through the philosophy of Ubuntu. Additionally, it can provide peculiar solutions to environmental problems, including biodiversity loss, climate change, and resource depletion, with a focus on sustainable means of living. Grounded in the oneness of all living beings, African indigenous wisdom is a treasure yet to be explored by the world; it is the known beginning, and humankind should return to it for its sustainability.

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